

LOVE AS SACRIFICE, LOVE AS MUTUALITY:
RESPONSE TO JEFFREY TILLMAN

by Don Browning

Abstract. Jeffrey Tillman is perceptive in noticing that certain Protestant theologians have used evolutionary theory to become more sympathetic to Roman Catholic views of Christian love. But he is incorrect in saying that these formulations deemphasize a place for self-sacrifice in Christian love. Christian love defined as a strenuous equal-regard for both other and self also requires sacrificial efforts to restore love as equal-regard when finitude and sin undermine genuine mutuality and community.

Keywords: Christian love; equal-regard; group selection; kin altruism; neo-Thomism; psychotherapy; sacrificial love; self-regard; survival

There are many important insights in J. Jeffrey Tillman's article "Sacrificial Agape and Group Selection in Contemporary American Christianity" (2008). Certainly there is more interest in group selection today than was once the case, even though it still is not the dominant view in evolutionary theory. But it is important, growing in respect among both biologists and philosophers, and doubtless has important implications for theology.

In spite of its growing prestige, however, it does not have the definitive implications for the Christian concept of love that Tillman believes it has. In fact, its implications may be antithetical to Christian love. The emphasis of group selection on individual sacrifice for group survival comes at the expense of other competitive groups. Tillman says it well when he both defines and endorses multilevel selection. He writes, "Multilevel selection does not maintain that groups are the arena for development of all adaptive traits, only for those that assist the fitness of a group relative to other

Don Browning is Alexander Campbell Professor of Religious Ethics and the Social Sciences Emeritus, Divinity School, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL 60637; e-mail dsbrowni@midway.uchicago.edu.

[*Zygon*, vol. 43, no. 3 (September 2008)]

© 2008 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0591-2385

groups competing with them for resources” (p. 544). It seems strange to offer group selection theory as support for a strong self-sacrificial model of Christian love when it implies that individual sacrificial love enhances the survival, and indeed victory, of the group at the expense of other competing groups. What happens to the doctrine of loving the enemy and the stranger in Christian love, which Tillman also affirms?

My main goal is not to dismantle Tillman’s view of Christian love as strong self-sacrifice. I intend instead to correct his interpretation of my view of Christian love as mutuality or equal-regard. I want to show how he has overlooked the vital role of self-sacrificial love within my view of love as equal-regard. I believe that Tillman distorts the ideas of Gene Outka, Stephen Pope, and Stephen Post, but I will not attempt to defend them. I primarily defend my own formulation of love.

Tillman is perceptive in suggesting that these three Protestant theologians and I, in our openness to certain insights from the contemporary social sciences, also have shown appreciation for features of Christian love often articulated by Roman Catholicism and neglected by classical Protestantism. In my case, I call myself a liberal Protestant. I differ from Roman Catholicism on a number of important theological concepts. I do believe that Protestants have something to learn from certain Thomistic and neo-Thomistic Catholic views of Christian love. But this does not mean that I discount a prominent role for self-sacrifice in my view of Christian love.

Tillman has three complaints about my view of Christian love. First, he believes that I have unwisely incorporated insights from modern psychotherapy to the effect that self-love is good and self-hate is bad. Second, he thinks I hold that we learn to love others by first coming to love ourselves. Third, he contends that I see an emphasis on self-sacrifice as an impediment to the analogical extension of our natural love for family and kin to the wider community, even to strangers and enemies.

Tillman gets one of my arguments correct, that “preoccupation with self-sacrifice has been used over the centuries to justify the subjugation and injustice toward women and many disadvantaged groups” (p. 548). This is doubtless true, and it is interesting that Tillman does not try to refute it. If strong self-sacrifice is the goal of the Christian life, it is tempting to tell disadvantaged minorities, women, and even the young that self-sacrifice for the good of others is one’s lot in life and that protest and resistance to exploitation and oppression are inappropriate for Christians.

In answer to his first complaint, a careful reading of my *Generative Man* ([1973] 1975), *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies* ([1987] 2004), and *Christian Ethics and the Moral Psychologies* (2006) should reveal that throughout I have been a critic of modern psychotherapy’s overemphasis on self-fulfillment and self-actualization as the goal of life. In all of these books I make energetic criticisms of the implicit ethical egoism of Sigmund Freud, the humanistic psychologies of Carl Rogers and Abraham

Maslow, and the depth psychology of Carl Jung. Second, Tillman overlooks a fundamental teaching of most psychotherapy—that we do not learn to affirm ourselves through some individual act of the will. We learn to have what Reinhold Niebuhr called an “ordinate,” in contrast to an “inordinate,” self-affirmation through our relationships, that is, through the love and affirmation of others for us. For Niebuhr, this includes the love of God for us. So, self-affirmation is not the presupposition for loving others; it is the consequence of having been loved. Once this is said, self-affirmation does contribute to the love of others; it is a way of sharing with others the fact that we have first been loved.

Tillman advances his third criticism in one sentence. He writes, “Furthermore, he suggests that correlations between a sense of obligation for kinfolk and care for wider communities may mean that historic Christian emphases on self-sacrifice stifle the application of Christian care to wider circles” (p. 548). In this crowded thought, Tillman is rejecting a very complex argument that goes to the heart of the difference between classic Protestant and Roman Catholic views of Christian love. It also goes to the heart of different ways Christians relate nature and creation to their normative understanding of Christian love and, hence, to different ways they may relate insights from psychology and evolutionary theory to their views of how Christians should love self and others.

My understanding of the relation of kin altruism to Christian love relies heavily on Thomas Aquinas and the neo-Thomistic Belgium moral theologian Louis Janssens. Aquinas spoke of the “order of love” (1917, Q 26). These are inclinations of human nature, implanted by God in creation, to love one’s children partially because they are extensions of ourselves. But Christians love their children for a second and even more important reason: because they are children and gifts of God. Aquinas believed this natural interweaving of self-regard and other-regard in kin relationships extends to siblings, parents, and other kin. The insight that Aquinas had is consistent with contemporary evolutionary psychology and its doctrine of inclusive fitness first stated by William Hamilton (1964) and later developed by Robert Trivers (1972) and then by E. O. Wilson (1975). Of course, Aquinas had no theory of the shared genes between parents, children, siblings, and cousins. But the prescientific naturalistic observations consistent with the scientific explanations of contemporary evolutionary theory can be found in Aquinas.

Christian love is more than love of kin, however. It entails in principle loving all humans, including the stranger and the enemy. The point of my argument, as it was with Aquinas, is that love of the other—even the nonreciprocating stranger and hostile enemy—builds on and extends the natural entanglements of self-regard and other-regard embedded in kin altruism. God’s grace does not suppress kin affections; it builds on and

extends these natural affections to include the other, be it nonkin neighbor, stranger, or oppressive and angry opponent. Extending this natural affection, with the help of God's grace, requires acts of self-sacrifice, but this sacrificial love builds on natural affections. It does not function to extinguish them. This is the argument that I develop at some length in *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate* ([1997] 2000), *Marriage and Modernization* (2003), *Christian Ethics and the Moral Psychologies* (2006), and *Equality and the Family* (2007), books that Tillman does not discuss in his article.

There is more to say. It is true that my view of Christian love is closer to the *caritas* model of Roman Catholicism than to the strong *agape* view that Anders Nygren (1953) attributed to Martin Luther and much of classic Protestantism. According to Nygren, strong *agape* separates Christian love from *eros*, the Greek word for the natural affection for self and other exemplified by kin altruism. Biblical *agape*, he argued, is supernatural through and through. The *caritas* model, on the other hand, sees normative Christian love building on and extending these natural energies.

I have found the writings of recently deceased Louvain moral theologian Janssens useful for interpreting the meaning of love as *caritas* and stating the proper role of self-sacrifice in normative Christian love. For him, Christian love is primarily about community, a community of equal-regard and mutuality. It is about treating the other as a child of God, or, as Immanuel Kant would say, an end in herself. This is not an ethic of reciprocity. It is not a matter of treating the other as a sacred end if the other does the same in return. It is not a conditional love. It is an equal-regard and mutuality that is unconditioned. The Christian must continue to treat the other as a child of God—an end and never a means alone—in spite of the other's failure to reciprocate and even in spite of acts of hostility and rejection from the other. Because the Christian is also a child of God, he can expect the other to treat him as an end, as sacred, and as a child of God; but being so treated, loved, and respected by the other is not, for the Christian, a condition for loving the other. This, according to Janssens, is the meaning of Christian neighbor love, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 11:19; Mark 12:31).

Janssens is fully aware, as I am, that we live in a finite and sinful world. Human relationships go wrong between individuals and also between groups and nations. Human beings are and can be self-serving. Ordinate self-regard, as Niebuhr called it, can become anxious, grasping, and oppressive and become inordinate self-regard. This is sin. When this happens, community equal-regard and mutuality break down. Strife, destructive competition, envy, and hate emerge. Hence, Christian love as equal-regard and mutuality requires the Christian to sacrifice, go the extra mile, and reach out in an attempt to bring the relationship back to a place of equal-regard, mutuality, and genuine community. Janssens writes, "After the model of

God's love in Christ who loved us and gave himself up for us, our love is to include self-giving and self-sacrifice as long as we live in a world of conflict and sin. We should love our enemies and persecutors, take the initiative in forgiving, overcome evil with good, and even lay down our life for our friends" (1977, 228). Christians should do this not as an end in itself or to oppose competitive groups, as Tillman seems to believe, but as an effort to restore and maintain true equal-regard and mutuality.

Tillman's strong self-sacrificial model of Christian love misses how Christian love builds on and extends self-regard as well as actively works to transform the other to respect all persons as ends. New Testament scholar Luise Schottroff believes that Christian love means loving the enemy nonviolently yet actively in an effort to persuade the enemy to regard all others with adequate respect:

The enemies are to abandon their enmity; in other words, they must undergo a change of attitude. The command to love the enemy is an appeal to take up a missionary attitude toward one's persecutors. This brings out the universal all-embracing claim of the salvation offered by Christianity. Even the enemies of the community are to be given a place in its common life and in the kingly rule of God. (Schottroff, 1975, 23)

In other words, the Christian is not to accept passively the evil of the enemy but to try actively to transform the enemy, offering the enemy salvation and a new capacity to treat the exploited party with new respect. Schottroff believes that the nonviolent transformative programs of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. are good modern illustrations of the proper meaning of Christian love as applied to those who are our enemies.

In conclusion, the purpose of self-sacrifice is the restoration of a community of mutuality and equal-regard. There is little difference between seeing God's transformative grace as building on and extending the natural energies of kin altruism (my model) and God's grace building on and extending the natural energies of group selection (Tillman's model). In ways that Tillman does not acknowledge, both models build on and extend natural inclinations. In either case, this dialectical interaction between nature and grace should not lead Christians to sacrifice for their group, tribe, church, or society to win out over competitors, as Tillman thinks group selection implies. Rather, in both cases, natural inclinations must be extended by grace to actively and self-sacrificially transform the other to be capable, in turn, of treating all persons with the love ethic of equal-regard.

REFERENCES

- Aquinas, Thomas. 1917. *Summa Theologica*, III. London: R. & T. Washbourne.
 Browning, Don. [1973] 1975. *Generative Man*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox.
 ———. [1987] 2004. *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
 ———. [1997] 2000. *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox.
 ———. 2003. *Marriage and Modernization*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans.

- . 2006. *Christian Ethics and the Moral Psychologies*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans.
- . 2007. *Equality and the Family*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans.
- Hamilton, William. 1964. "The General Evolution of Social Behavior, II." *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 7:17–52.
- Janssens, Louis. 1977. "Norms and Priorities of a Love Ethics." *Louvain Studies* 6:207–38.
- Nygren, Anders. 1953. *Agape and Eros*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox.
- Schottroff, Luise. 1975. "Non-Violence and the Love of One's Enemies." In *Essays on the Love Commandment*, ed. Reginald Fuller, 9–40. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Tillman, J. Jeffrey. 2008. "Sacrificial Agape and Group Selection in Contemporary American Christianity." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 43:541–56.
- Trivers, Robert. 1972. "Parental Investment and Sexual Selection." In *Sexual Selection and the Descent of Man*, ed. B. Campbell, 136–79. Chicago: Aldine.
- Wilson, E. O. 1975. *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press.